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Matter of Fact

Not From Beautiful Blonde Spies

By Stewart Alsop

IT IS STRANGE how the highest Administration officials stubbornly disbelieve what their own intelligence experts tell them. Take, for example, Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson's recent testimony before the House Appropriations Committee:

"You know, we cannot get very far ahead of them (the Soviets), because we talk so much in this country and write so many articles and publish so many pictures and magazine articles that they are always bound to be able to do it. Most of their weapons of course, really came out of the Western world . . ."

No national myth dies harder than the notion that the Soviets are technically backward, capable only of slavishly copying what the West has already produced. But it is really very odd that Secretary Wilson, after more than three years in office, should still believe in this comfortable myth. For throughout those three years, Wilson has been literally deluged with evidence pointing in precisely the opposite direction.

There is, moreover, nothing particularly mysterious about the great bulk of this evidence. It does not come from beautiful blonde spies.

MOST OF IT comes, instead, from such items as a long, profusely illustrated book called "Aviation Gas Turbine Engines," by G. S. Skubachevski. His formidable work was published in Moscow last year and it is freely available in technical bookshops in the Soviet Union. When it arrived in Washington recently it caused quite a fluttering in the intelligence dovetails.

It contained, for one thing, numerous cut-away drawings of something called a "split compressor engine." The split compressor system is used in the most advanced American jet engine design, and all diagrams and performance data are top secret. Yet here was a mere textbook, distributed to mere student engineers in the Soviet Union, containing numerous detailed diagrams of the split compressor engine.

The notion that "they get it all from spies," which is a companion myth to the "backward Russians" myth, does not hold up in this case either. The text of the book contains not only a highly sophisticated discussion of the split compressor engine, but a number of jet engineering techniques new to American ex-

perts. Soviet spies could not have stolen these ideas from us, simply because we didn't have them.

Reliable information on Soviet weapons progress from such overt, non-cloak-and-dagger sources as Skubachevski's book, is not as impossibly difficult to come by as it is often cracked up to be. Last year, for example, the magazine "Aviation Week" published excellent photographs of the mass flights over Moscow of the new Soviet heavy bomber, the Bison—the same plane which Wilson had previously opined was a fake, or a mere handmade prototype.

The publication of these photographs caused horror in the Pentagon, and the editor of the magazine was called on the carpet to explain where he got such "top secret" material. He explained that he had called the New York representative of Sovfoto, the Soviet propaganda agency. Soviet had happily offered him as many excellent photographs as he could use, and motion picture films of the overflights as well.

THE NOTION that all information about Soviet weapons developments comes from beautiful but highly untrustworthy blonde spies is one reason why such officials as Wilson do not really believe their own intelligence. Another reason is that men like Wilson and Secretary of the Treasury George M. Humphrey tend to regard the intelligence experts as impractical longchairs.

Secretary Humphrey, for example, recently became much exercised when he learned from a British steel tycoon who had made a tour of the Soviet Union that Soviet steel mills were as good as the best in Britain. As a member of the National Security Council, Humphrey had been repeatedly told exactly the same thing in intelligence briefings. But he only really believed it when he learned it from a fellow businessman and payroll-meeter.

A third reason is that the Central Intelligence Agency is prohibited from making comparative estimates of Soviet and American weapons development, so that the estimates lack meaning and impact. But there is also another reason why high officials tend to disbelieve or disregard their own intelligence experts. Believing them would inexorably suggest all sorts of highly expensive and highly inconvenient action.

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